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Distance Dramaturgy

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ABSTRACT

A correspondence and conversation between Dee Heddon and Alex Kelly.

How do you tell a life? Throughout much of 2004 and into 2005 Dee Heddon and Alex Kelly corresponded by email: about auto/biographical performance, auto/biographical literature, Lad Lit, reading, writing, story telling and Third Angel's performance making processes. This discussion was one strand of the making process of Third Angel's performance *The Lad Lit Project*; a dramaturgy at a distance.

Responding to research prompts from Alex – reading lists, notebook quotes, research and rehearsal room reports – Dee intervened with questions, provocations, opinions, suggestions for devising exercises. The personal, practical and theoretical intertwined. These interventions had a significant effect on the process and final show, helping Alex to move the work from a theatrical quoting of the Lad Lit genre, to become a performance work that is both autobiographical and about autobiography.

For the creation of this text Dee and Alex return to their original correspondence, teasing out the significant strands and key exchanges, reflecting on carrying out dramaturgy at a distance, and discussing the impact of this process on the final performance. A document of quoted archive material (emails, notebook extracts) and discussion after the event.

Beginnings

Some time in 2004, Alex Kelly phoned Dee Heddon and whilst neither of us can remember what, precisely, Alex proposed in that phone call, we presume that he must have invited Dee to be involved in some way in the development of Third Angel's new show (working title: *Writing Backwards*, later to become *The Lad Lit Project*). On the 10 May, Dee emailed Alex for the first time, confirming that she would

definitely be interested in sticking an oar in
somewhere, sometime.

She also revealed, in this first email, her dislike of phones and preference for writing.

Over the following eight months, we exchanged a total of 18 emails, producing some 19,000 words between us. Reflecting on our collaboration, 'distance dramaturgy' seems the most appropriate term for the process. Alex was working in Sheffield, Dee was working in Exeter. At no point did we meet up in person, nor even talk on the phone. All of our exchanges were done via email. Though Alex never asked Dee to be the dramaturge, looking back, some years after the fact, it is apparent that this is what she was doing. For the document presented here, we return to our original correspondence, teasing out the significant strands and key exchanges, reflecting on what it is to do dramaturgy at a distance.

Correspondence

Third Angel usually works around a core practice of two co-directors, Alex Kelly and Rachael Walton. As Rachael was unavailable to be part of the early process of *The*

Lad Lit Project,¹ or ‘the blokes’ show’, Alex sought to replace her role – ‘a foil’ – with other collaborations and conversations, Dee being one of these. The exchange that took place between us was an extended correspondence about auto/biography, story telling, performance and devising.

‘Correspondence’ registers in two ways here; it implies communication by letters, but also a correspondence of interests, a shared focus. Whilst Dee’s specific role as a collaborator was left undefined, it was clear why she, personally, was being invited and what, specifically, she might bring to the process. An academic with a research interest in the use of autobiography in performance, Dee also has a familiarity with the work and practice of Third Angel, as well as knowledge of devising processes in general;² and, of specific value to *The Lad Lit Project* (though perhaps not consciously recognised by Alex at the time of his invitation) she is a self-identified feminist and lesbian. The essential starting point of a shared, corresponding focus is usefully, and perhaps even essentially, unsettled by non-correspondence – a view from elsewhere.

Hi Alex

Good to hear from you. [...] Project sounds very interesting – not least from the gender perspective you’re taking.

As Dee had never read any ‘Lad Lit’ (nor, for that matter, any ‘Chick Lit’), Alex’s first job was to teach Dee what he knew; Dee’s first ‘dramaturgical job’, in

¹ ‘Lad Lit’ is the generic term used to describe fictional books by men that depict men’s lives (usually urban men in their late-20s/early 30s), and which are written in first person. *The Lad Lit Project* was inspired by these books.

² Dee had, prior to this point, interviewed Alex and Rachael about their devising practice and use of autobiography.

turn, was to learn. One of the initial things she learnt from Alex was that the significant female characters in Lad Lit are usually there, in part,

to provide a view point external to the gang, to get the narrator to look afresh at his own behaviour.

Dee's lack of knowledge about Lad Lit allowed her to strategically use her ignorance/naivety to pose some initial questions to Alex, including:

3. Is Lad Lit a middle-class phenomenon?

6. What sort of Lad are you?

7. Is Lad Lit meant to confirm what I/we already think?

These questions were clearly aimed at prompting Alex to look from other directions; Dee was seeking his blind spots. Alex's first email had made reference to one aspect of his research and development process, that he would later refer to, for want of a better phrase, as the 'Talking Shops':

I've been inviting groups of men in for discussions around the themes of the show - the third one is tonight. What really got the first group going were: gangs/groups of mates, pubs, football and the 'life in chapters' idea.

Dee, working at a distance from the studio research and devising process, imagined the scene of these Talking Shops:

13. Was there any bloke in any of the groups who didn't say much?

14. What silences occurred in the group discussions?

15. What moments of awkwardness?

Three years later, Alex remembers these questions in particular as being surprisingly astute and significant to the process; they seemed to recognise early on how important these group discussions would be to the final show.

While Alex thought about and then wrote answers to each of Dee's initial questions, Dee, in order to better understand the context of the show being developed, read four 'Lad Lit' novels, each recommended as good examples of the genre by Alex (Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, Tim Lott's *White City Blue*, Harry Ritchie's *The Friday Night Club*, and Mike Gayle's *Mr Commitment*). Reading the Lad Lit books, Dee was surprised to find that she quite enjoyed them but she also admitted to feeling a little like an interloper or eavesdropper; later she wondered if this was her role in the creative process.

Exchanges

The term 'email exchanges' is appropriate in this process of generative collaboration. We were conscious of answering each other: not only did each email generate another email in response, but also an exchange of knowledge and ideas. Dee learnt a lot about Lad Lit from Alex – and also more about the processes of performance-making

used by Third Angel. Alex, in turn, asked Dee to reveal her thoughts about autobiography:

So, what I would like to ask you, and this gets to one of the fundamentals of the work I guess, is what your thoughts are on why we feel the need to tell our own stories.

In another exchange, Alex swapped his 'Lad Lit formula' for Dee's reflections on what she had now read. He shared with her the ten strands that he had identified in Lad Lit, including 'Localised Slang and Accent', 'Coming of Age/Turning Point in Life',³ and 'The Girl who is too Good'; she shared with him the fact that she didn't know Lad Lit would be all about getting the girl; that she didn't expect the (male) protagonists to be so complicated (they fulfil, exceed *and* contradict all the stereotypes of masculinity); that she found the assumptions and inscriptions of normative sexuality deeply irritating, alongside the fact that all of the books conformed to cultural expectations of a 'valuable life'. (Why couldn't Rob, in *High Fidelity*, simply be a happy record store owner?) Dee also sent Alex a further 23 questions – this time more informed.

What's the point of Lad Lit?

What's *your* relationship to Lad Lit?

Do you know what the show's relationship to Lad Lit is? (Emulating, critical, interested/analytical?)

³ It is notable that Dee and Alex both turned thirty-five during the making of *The Lad Lit Project*.

The question of the show's relationship to Lad Lit would become fundamental. Alex read this email mid-way through three days of practical work with performer/devisor Jerry Killick. He responded:

Which brings me back round to what the relationship of the show is to the genre? It has to be more than the genre, critical of it, challenging of it, but also doing something different to it - doing the job Lad Lit doesn't do. [...] So this week I'm putting the pile of books back on the shelf, and am going to work away from the genre for a few days, and see where that takes us.

Dee also asked questions that in turn fed directly into the other collaborations in the studio:

If you were to choose five photographs from your own 'photo album' - real or imagined - of pictures taken between 1987 and 1989,⁴ what would they be? [...] What might be just outside the frame? What happened just before? What happened just after?

Dee, emerging as an interlocutor, threw in what Alex refers to as 'curve balls'. These became part of the devising process, helping to widen the frame of the work, to

⁴ This is the time period that Alex had originally said would be the setting for 'his Lad Lit novel'.

usefully move the process away from its initial inspiration, and to embrace the material generated by the Talking Shops as the heart of the show.

Though Dee never made it to Sheffield to see works-in-progress, she did watch video recordings and emailed critical responses. In addition to prompting further auditing/articulation on Alex's part, or a focusing of concerns, she also sometimes corroborated and confirmed Alex's own thoughts and contributed, serendipitously, to discussions that had also taken place in the studio. Dee wrote:

So everyone has a book inside them, but what happens when you try and write that book as a response to the books of Lad Lit? What borrowings might be made, what models used and then discarded because they don't fit, what tensions arise? So everyone's got a book, but what's the purpose of this live book? (I always come back to that question; sorry.)

Alex replied:

We tried some stuff with all the books physically on stage, and the 'what year is it, where are we, who's in your gang' stuff all comes from the books, too. We will play with this some more I think.

He said:

Thinking about what you wrote, I wonder now if we can reference books/autobiographies/fictionalising more, without referring to specific novels...

He added:

Your 'what's the point of the live book?' is of course fundamental - the specific version of 'who are we, what are we doing and why are we doing it in front of this audience?' questions that we (try to) ask of ourselves every project.

Some of Dee's prompts engaged directly with the dramaturgy of the developing show:

I like the writing of chapter titles. (Are these 3 separate books, with 3 separate titles? Or is this one book? The answer to that might make a difference to the dramaturgy of the show.)

She wondered if

the placing of the stories in an order will either present us with a random selection of stories which stand alone (how does this relate to the notion of a book though?), or construct a 'narrative' - however complex or deliberately contested that is. But I do

think you've got a good frame here to begin to think about the dramaturgical structure.

It was only later, in reviewing our written exchanges that we noticed, with surprise, Dee's use of this word.

Writing Distance/Writing Time

Writing implies, literally, a distance between, as one writes *to*... The distance allowed our collaboration to run parallel and contribute to the devising process, whilst remaining usefully distinct or separate from it. Dee's physical distance from the rehearsal space gave her something of a blank page, a different horizon, which in turn allowed a freedom: she couldn't write directly in response to what was happening in the other strands of the devising process. It was these parallel tracks that allowed space for the curve balls.

Alex too, responding to Dee's remote interrogations, had to step off the studio track and enter a different space and time frame for writing and thinking (he types slowly). This helped his own thinking and reflection, because to explain things clearly to Dee, he had to better articulate them to himself first. The importance, to Alex, of the correspondence with Dee came in part from its continuity. Because it extended beyond the periods of creating material in the devising room, it challenged and interrogated his longer term intentions and aims for the work, his agenda for the piece as a whole.

Paradoxically, distance seems to allow for intimacy. In this correspondence about autobiography we appropriately shared many autobiographical stories. But for both of us, there was a sense of liberation in distance too. The distance between

allowed a greater freedom for critical response (no need to be embarrassed or awkward) – while the time of writing allowed this critical response to be careful and considered. The potential for written words to mis-communicate is great. We both worked hard to find an economy and precision in our textual dialogue. Epistolary writing, though a conversation, has its own peculiar rhythms of speech – less dialogue than an exchange of monologues; or a relay of textual threads. Turn by turn. Whilst conversation in shared time and space, with its interruptions, overlaps, diversions and unfinished lines is undoubtedly productive, there is something to be gained from contemplative exchange. Our two voices each had their own uninterrupted time. And in writing, one can take time to write, see how something turns out, delete and rewrite. And one can take time to read, can save, can return and reread.

Writing also has its own irregular rhythms of collaboration. On a pragmatic level, the fact that it is a process of separation, which requires only one of us to be present, meant that it could be ‘fitted in’ around the week’s other activities, and our separate timetables. This is a good thing, as the correspondence between us shows that, as well as being in Exeter and Sheffield, over the time of our collaboration we also travelled to Prague, Glasgow, Lisbon, Edinburgh and New York. The email artefacts also reveal that we mostly wrote to each other in the evenings or weekends. The process of writing, then, allowed each of us to think and respond according to the rhythms of our other projects. It became a valued space somehow outside of daily time; our ‘writing time’ was a shared creative exchange, a time to look forward to.

Collaboration

Alex asked Dee to be involved in the project, more or less instinctively, then we figured out what her role was by starting work. We didn’t begin our collaboration by

defining terms or roles. We simply started to write to each other and in that writing we embedded the protocols, protocols which left the process of exchange open, generative and responsive. Looking back, we can also see that we strategically provided get out clauses, ways to let each other off the hook, without offence, if necessary; ways to be self-protective (usually through self-effacement), but we were also encouraging and protective of each other. Each email had within it a gesture of commitment and a statement of value – value relating both to the emerging work and to the collaborative process itself.

- As with everything I write in response, take it or leave it.
- I tend to work quite instinctively, following a particular line, so, as I had hoped, your input makes me turn my head occasionally as you say "what about that...?" and this serves to open the process up.
- If you would like me to reply to anything in particular, or want my opinion on anything in particular, or just want me to shut the fuck up, then please do just tell me.

On reflection, the contract that emerged with Dee wasn't so far removed from that established with deviser-performers: collaborators are free to offer ideas and explore their own concerns within the territory that has been marked out for the project; they have licence to be creative and opinionated and though there's no guarantee that

anything generated will be directly or indirectly used in the final work, it is assumed that much of it will be (which is, of course, precisely why they are invited to be collaborators). The exact nature of the collaboration is defined by the people engaged in it.

Over the eight months of our correspondence, *The Lad Lit Project* evolved from a three man show into a solo performance by Alex, which drew extensively on the various sources of research that he had undertaken during the process. In her last email to Alex, Dee reflected on a video of the final work-in-progress, responding to the work as a show nearing completion, rather than one in the process of being discovered:

How do you 'relate' a person? What is it that makes you you? Where might you 'find' your 'self'? [...]
Perhaps, simply, in the end, it's just the way you tell it.

This last email doesn't recognise its status as such, nor does Alex reply acknowledging this. Dee's final dramaturgical role for *The Lad Lit Project* was to write a Programme note.⁵ She first saw the show on its initial UK tour two months later. Since then, Dee has published a monograph called *Autobiography and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008). In corresponding with Alex some of her thoughts lined up and they endure. Third Angel has made several more performance projects, notably *Presumption* and *9 Billion Miles From Home*, each with different, but equally multi-stranded devising processes. *The Lad Lit Project* continues to tour

⁵ http://www.thirdangel.co.uk/iframe_content.php?id=31&cat=more

in the UK and internationally. Dee and Alex continue to communicate across distances.⁶

⁶ For *Distance Dramaturgy* Alex and Dee took turns to email each other questions that prompted reflection on their collaboration for *The Lad Lit Project*. The actual writing of *Distance Dramaturgy* has borrowed the Ben Elton/Richard Curtis 'Blackadder model' – a model neither Dee nor Alex has used before. This process required one of them to write the first draft of the article then email it to the other, deleting the 'original' version from their files. The other then wrote draft two making whatever revisions or rewrites they wanted, and mailed it back, in turn destroying their 'original' version, and so on.